



FOR LIFE

keeping water flowing

LIFE story

Pipeline helps farm enterprise diversify

By Melissa Pouliot for GWMWater

Farming comes naturally to fourth-generation Wimmera-Mallee farmer Ross Cook who farms on 'Echunga' with his son Simon.

But one thing that doesn't come naturally on the flat arid property, 15 kilometres west of Hopetoun, is water. During his lifetime an ongoing challenge to his cropping and stock enterprise has been a reliable, quality and secure water source.

Until now.

Thanks to completion of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project not only does Ross have access to high-quality water but he has opportunity and most importantly – choices.

Connecting to the pipeline in 2009 was the final step in Ross and Simon's planning to establish a 3500-sheep feedlot to complement the cropping side of their business.

With a strong network of connections in the feedlot industry they were ready to go as soon as the pipeline reached their area.

And they haven't looked back.

In the late 1990s the Cook family decided to sell all their sheep and focus on cropping wheat, barley, oats, canola and vetch. Using no-till farming techniques, the change worked well.

And Ross says they were glad of the change when drought hit hard in the early 2000s because they wouldn't have been able to keep water up to stock.

But they were keen to get back into the sheep because they had so much knowledge and so many contacts in the sheep industry.

"Thanks to the pipeline, we are more confident and most importantly, we have got more choices."

When they knew the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project was going ahead they started planning their feedlot.

"Water was one restriction for our feedlot plans – it was the final hurdle. A combination of things came together at the same time including us being able to connect to the pipeline."

Ross says the feedlot is part of diversifying on the farm to spread risk and provide an outlet for some of the lower-grade grains they produce.

"For us the feedlot is an opportunity and the pipeline allows us to pursue that opportunity within our farm planning to whatever extent we like. For example if there is a severe dip in grain prices and sheep prices are still ok, we can swing the pendulum a bit more towards the feedlot," Ross says.

Another on-farm benefit of the pipeline is being able to fence paddocks to soil type.

"When we got out of the sheep our fences deteriorated a bit, so when we started the feedlot we had to reorganise the fences. Because of the pipeline we're re-fencing paddocks differently to what we had – we can fence to soil type without having to worry about fixed water points such as dams."

Ross says that having secure, quality water means if they see a terrific opportunity, they can grab it.

"What we're doing with the feedlot is not rocket science, but it's another string to our farming bow. Now that we've got a constant, secure, quality supply of water – if we see an opportunity we can go in hard and grab it. We can vary the sheep we put through the feedlot or we can shut it down completely and just focus on the cropping.